

2003 Deer Season Forecast

by John Higley

All across the state, during the deer seasons of 2002, the universal lament by hunters was that the weather was not their friend. It was too hot and dry for good deer hunting, they groaned. And what do you know, the final estimated harvest tallied by the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) seemed to bear them out. In 2001, when the fall months were also warm, the estimated buck take was 33,273 for all zones and special hunts; in 2002 that number dropped to 31,553.

To those who have hunted California regularly for many years, there is no surprise here. The last time the kill rose significantly was in 2000 when stormy weather actually arrived during the season rather than a month later. That year the harvest of bucks climbed to 39,062.

Despite the fact that the over all statewide hunter success rate in 2002 was only 17 percent, as compared to 21 percent in 2000, the season was very good for some hunters who have learned how to put themselves in the right place at the right time, hot weather or cold, and those who were just plain lucky. Looking at some zones with higher percentages of success, we find that hunters in the A zone scored around 27 percent of the time; B zone hunters 23 percent of the time and hunters in the X zones enjoyed anywhere from 24 percent to 49 percent success. Incidentally, the above figures were rounded to the nearest whole number for simplification.



As anyone who hunts deer in the Golden State knows, there is a wide variety of hunts to choose from. They also know that drawing a tag for premium hunts, including special general methods hunts, archery hunts, junior hunts and muzzleloading rifle hunts, not to mention regular X zones hunts, takes some doing. To get a tag you've got to apply and face the sometimes long odds in the June drawing. However, the unique thing about California hunting is that you can still purchase tags over the counter for many other zones. So, if you wish, you can hunt somewhere every year whether or not you're lucky in the draw.

Speaking of the drawing, Craig Stowers, Deer Program Coordinator for the DFG, noted the initiation of a preference point system for the premium deer hunts where quotas are always met in the drawing. Beginning last year, hunters who put in for one of these hunts and failed to get a tag, started earning preference points that will accrue until they are drawn. For 2003, 90 percent of the available tags will go to preference point holders and 10 percent will be awarded in the random draw.

Okay, the obvious question here is what will the year 2003 bring? Well, no one can predict the weather conditions accurately so far in advance so the soothsayer with the crystal ball will draw upon years and years of experience—and make an educated guess. The focus here will be on a Deer Assessment Unit (DAU) basis. The 11 DAUs are areas with similar habitat characteristics that encompass several existing deer hunt zones each. By looking at an entire region, rather than trying to pinpoint deer numbers in one portion of what may be a huge chunk of similar real estate, the DFG hopes to get a more accurate sample of general trends as they fluctuate up or down over a period of years.

Before exploring the DAUs, here are a few details to give you a better understanding of the scope of deer hunting in California. First, there are six recognized subspecies of mule deer in the state including Rocky Mountain mule deer, Inyo mule deer, California mule deer, burro deer, Southern mule deer and Columbian black-tailed deer.

Photo, left: Wendi Williams with her "first deer, ever!" taken in Zone X12. Top, right: Jerry Morrison harvested this three-point buck from Zone X10. Bottom, right: Shannon Platt celebrates this 9x8 buck, taken from Zone X9B, with his children, Tyrel and Michaela.



Second, deer occupy 64 million acres of California soil, 46 percent of which is public land administered by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Roughly 50 percent is private land and the balance is overseen by various agencies including the DFG. The most numerous of the state's deer are blacktails which occupy the coastal mountains roughly from Santa Barbara to the Oregon border and range inland from Calaveras County north along the western slope of the Cascade-Sierra Nevada range.

Blacktails are popular with hunters because there are a lot of tags available throughout the zones where they live. However, Rocky Mountain mule deer are probably the most coveted because of their larger antler and body size and the type of relatively open habitat they prefer. Wouldn't you know it, though, these deer reside in the X zones where tags are always at a premium.

To most knowledgeable California big game hunters, any deer tag is a good deer tag even if it's for an area with a less than sterling track record. The more time one spends, even in a low success D zone, the better the odds are for consistent success. That said, here's a look at how things are going in the various DAUs as of 2003.

North/South Central Coast (DAUs 1 & 2)

DAUs 1 and 2 combined include the southern and northern portions of huge Zone A, Zone D13 and Zone B4. Zone A is unique for that's where the earliest deer hunts in the state are held. Archery hunting there starts in July and rifle hunting begins in August. Last year the harvest was estimated at 10,125 bucks, most of which were forked horns, which is not unusual for the region. In 2001 the take was a bit higher at 11,387. Based on the number of tags sold the success rates were 29 percent in 2001 and 27 percent in 2002. The lower take may result in more available bucks this year assuming the weather cooperates and is a trifle cooler than before.

As for Zone D13, the general rifle season left a lot to be desired. That's not surprising because the zone was one of several D zones closed to hunting due to extreme fire danger last fall. The other closed zones will be noted later. Anyway, the carryover should be noticeable in D13 this year. Assuming, of course, that the hunt is held as scheduled.

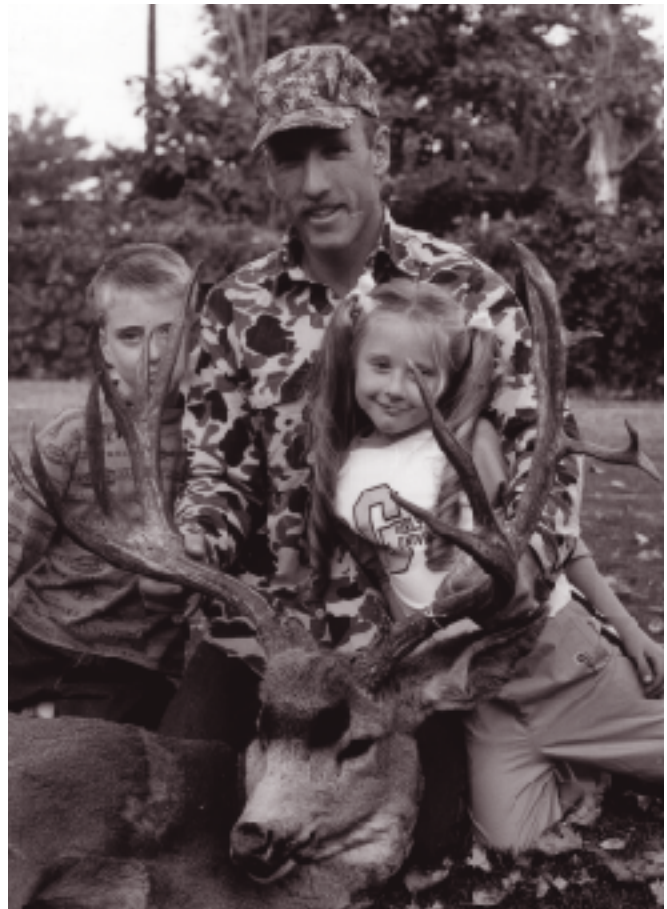
The last zone in these DAUs is B4 where hunters took 477 bucks last year and 549 bucks in 2001. Over all, the deer population in these DAUs is estimated to be around 200,704 animals. That's slightly down from 2001 when it was 208,509.

****Note** Population figures in these DAUs, as with the others to follow, are based on a three-year average and vary due to conditions during surveys and final harvest numbers. In other words they're useful to establish population trends but they are not exact.

Northwestern California (DAU 3)

This DAU takes in zones B1 through B6, minus B4, and contains some of the best blacktail deer range in the West. There is an apparent downward trend in Zone B6 where the positive effects of massive wildfires in 1987 are waning over time. Just the same, things are not all bad in the zone where hunters harvested 1,416 bucks in 2002 and 1,420 bucks in 2001.

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Throughout the B zones hunter success was right around 22 percent in 2001 and, as we saw previously, 23 percent in 2002. The zone where the most bucks were taken is Zone B1 where the estimate was 3,275. In 2001 that figure was lower at 2,852.

There are 55,000 tags available for the B zones of which 40,908 were purchased for the 2002 season. According to Craig Stowers, and senior wildlife biologist Dave Smith in the DFG's Northern California/North Coast Region, the herds in this region are stable despite the slight decline in B6. The deer population throughout the region was estimated to be around 146,003 in 2002 as compared to 157,600 in 2001.

Cascade/North Sierra (DAU 4)

This DAU contains the four C zones which cover an area roughly from Butte County to the Oregon border. These zones extend east from Interstate Highway 5 to the west slope of the Cascade Range. In 2002 11,500 tags were available for these popular zones and all of them were taken before the season opened.

The total kill in the C zones for 2002 was estimated at 1,619 bucks as compared to 1,776 in 2001. The success rate dropped slightly from 16 percent in 2001 to 15 percent last year.

Since both years were warm, there was only sporadic migration activity by the deer until the season was over. By comparison, in the year 2000, when early storms did come during the general rifle season, more than 1,900 bucks were taken.

In addition to the above figures, it's only fair to add the results from late hunt G1 which takes place in Zone C4. Last year 3,500 tags were available (and sold) and hunters harvested 585 bucks during the nine-day hunt. In 2001 the estimated take was 659 bucks taken by the same number of hunters. After losing deer for many years the population in DAU 4 seems to be holding steady. In 2001 the three year average was 38,142 animals and in 2002 it was 39,057.

Northeast California (DAU 9)

Some of the most sought-after tags in this part of the state are those for the seven northern X zones (out of a total of 17 X zones) where many of the state's Rocky Mountain mule deer, along with some blacktail/mule deer hybrids, reside. Zones included in DAU 9 are X1, X2, X3a, X3b, X4, X5a and X5b. The most tags are available for Zone X1 (2,850) and the fewest for Zone X5a (130). For the whole region last year only 4,965 tags were available and 1,151 bucks were taken. The

highest success rate (49 percent) occurred in Zone X3a where 142 bucks were taken.

Once again hot and dry weather had a detrimental affect on hunting success last year when the take of bucks went down in every zone. The deer population average in these X zones was down slightly from 22,799 in 2001 to 21,241 in 2002. Stowers noted that the small difference may be a reflection of certain conditions during spring and fall surveys as well as the lower kill by hunters which is also figured into the equation by the complicated computer model used.

Northeast Sierra/East Sierra (DAUs 10 & 11)

Five of the state's remaining X zones, X6a, X6b, X7a, X7b and X8, are situated in DAU 10 from Alpine County north. Meanwhile, X9a, X9b, X10 and X12 are in DAU 11. The estimated harvest in 2002 for all of the zones was 1,005 while in 2001 it was slightly higher at 1,039. The best success rate is usually in Zone X7a where hunters scored 39 percent of the time last year. Most of the deer in these zones are generally high on summer range until fall storms drive them down to lower areas. When that happens the harvest goes up accordingly.

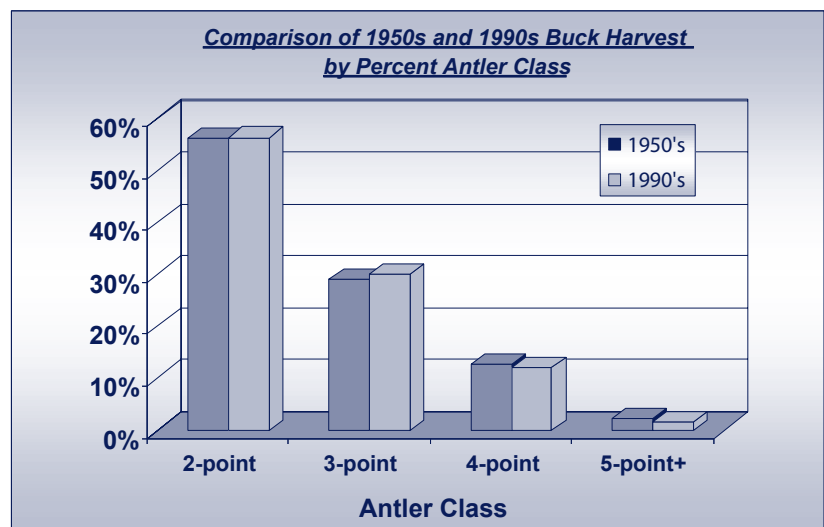
The total number of deer in DAU 10 is estimated to be around 8,267 for

Many say that deer hunting has changed in California, and there is little to refute that claim. Deer numbers peaked in California in the 1950s, and since that time the human population has greatly increased, while the number of deer hunters and deer harvested has declined. Habitat loss and competition for remaining resources have also taken their toll.

One thing that has not changed, however, is the percentage of deer harvested with large antlers. A state-wide comparison of the antler class of deer taken from 1951-1960 and 1991-2000 shows that about half (56 percent) of the deer harvested in both time periods were forked horn bucks. Three-point bucks showed a similar rate of 29-30 percent, four-points were harvested at approximately 12-13 percent, and bucks with five points or greater made up about 1.5-2 percent of the total re-

ported buck harvest. The data indicate that deer of each antler class have been taken at very nearly the same rate in the 1950s and the 1990s.

Data analyzed by Mary Sommer, an Associate Wildlife Biologist in the DFG's deer program.



California native Richard C. Bendix, age 74, harvested this non-typical Columbian blacktail buck from Zone C4 during archery season. The 7x5 buck received a score of 141 by the Pope and Young Club, and is considered one of the top three blacktail bucks taken during the 2001-2002 hunting season.



2002 and 7,617 for 2001. In DAU 11 the estimate is 11,281 animals for 2002, down from 11,700 in 2001 and higher than 2000 when the tally was 11,000. All in all the deer herds in DAUs 10 and 11 seem to have increased slightly and stabilized since declining in the early 1990s.

Central/Southern Sierra (DAUs 5 & 6)

DAU 5 contains five D zones including D3, D4 and D5 which are covered by the same tag. There are 33,000 tags available for the three zones and last year 29,953 were sold. The average hunter success here is around 10 percent and the total number of bucks taken last year was 2,988.

Zones D6 and D7 are also in DAU 5 and while the success rate for the 19,000 tag holders in the zones was 10 percent to 11 percent the estimated harvest in 2002 was up over 2001 in both zones. In 2001 D6 hunters got 865 bucks and in 2002 they harvested 971; in D7 the numbers were 903 and 989 respectively.

The population of deer in the above zones was estimated at 104,036 in 2002, a jump from 91,347 in 2001 and 83,700 in 2000.

Meanwhile, DAU 6 is home to zones D8, D9 and D10. Both D9 and

D10 saw an increase in the take and a slight increase in percent of hunter success which ranged from 12 percent (D9) to 14 percent (D10). In 2001 the harvest in D9 was 187 and in 2002 it was 234; in D10 the figures were 64 and 99. The population of deer in DAU 6 was estimated to be 20,320 in 2002 and 19,769 in 2001 meaning that things are on a level plane for the time being.

South Coast/Desert (DAUs 7 & 8)

Earlier we learned that Zone D13 (in DAUs 1 and 2) was closed to hunting last year during the general rifle season and now we'll get to the other zones that were subject to closures due to fire danger. All of DAU 7, which includes zones D11, D14, D15, D16 and D19, was closed for most of the general rifle season except for Zone D16. For that reason the harvest in those zones was obviously less than usual and not a true reflection of what a regular season would bring.

In any event, many tag holders were granted refunds of their tag costs because they couldn't hunt in the zones for which their tags were valid. Needless to say, there should be some carryover of bucks in DAU 7 in 2003. As it is the population estimate for DAU

7 shows a slight decline in the three year average, from 16,537 in 2001 to 14,480 in 2002.

As for DAU 8, this region includes desert zones D12, D17 and X9c. These zones offer some of the toughest deer hunting in the state. The success rate in zones D12, D17 and X9c falls between 7 and 10 percent. Depending on where you are in these zones, vehicle access is restricted by wilderness areas, the Mojave National Preserve and Death Valley National Park.

The average deer population estimate in DAU 8 shows 4,664 animals in 2001 and 4,530 in 2002. The animals are scattered but their numbers are about the same from year to year.

No matter where you hunt in this state, one of the keys to eventual success is a studied approach to deer hunting. Deer aren't just everywhere, and once you learn where they are apt to be in a particular zone at a particular time, you are one step closer to being one of the Golden State's successful deer hunters. Good luck in 2003!

John Higley is a freelance writer and avid deer hunter.